

## Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Lawrence Kohlberg developed a six stage theory of moral development, and he grouped these six stages into three, higher-order levels of development: 1) the Pre-Conventional Level, 2) the Conventional Level, and 3) the Post-Conventional or Principled Level. Each level is then further subdivided into two stages to make a total of six stages. The Pre-Conventional Level includes: a) stage one, the punishment and obedience orientation, and b) stage two, the instrumental purpose orientation. The Conventional Level includes: a) stage three, the morality of interpersonal cooperation, and b) stage four, the social-order-maintaining orientation. The Post-Conventional Level includes a) stage five, the social-contract orientation, and b) stage six, the universal ethical principle orientation

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1. Pre-Conventional Level
  - a. Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation,
  - b. Stage 2: The instrumental purpose orientation
2. Conventional Level
  - a. Stage 3: The morality of interpersonal cooperation
  - b. Stage 4: The social-order-maintaining orientation.
3. Post-Conventional or Principled Level.
  - a. Stage 5: The social-contract orientation
  - b. Stage 6: he universal ethical principle orientation

Kohlberg's developed his theory based on studies he conducted beginning in the 1950's. The participants in his initial study were 72 boys, from both middle-class and poor families in Chicago. They were ages 10, 13, and 16. He later added to his sample younger children, delinquents, and boys and girls from other American cities and from other countries.

Kohlberg interviewed the participants using a a series of dilemmas such as the following:

#### *Heinz Steals the Drug*

*In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$ 1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug-for his wife. Should the husband have done that? (Kohlberg, 1963, p. 19)*

Kohlberg is not interested in whether the participants says "yes" or "no" to this dilemma – he wanted to know the reasoning behind their answer. The interviewer asked a series of questions, such as why the participant thinks Heinz should or should not have stolen the drug; if Heinz had a right to steal the drug; if Heinz was violating the druggist's rights, and what sentence the judge should give Heinz once

he was caught. Once again, the main concern is with the reasoning behind the answers. From the interviews, Kohlberg classified the various responses into six stages.

### **Level 1. Preconventional Morality**

**Stage 1. Obedience and Punishment Orientation.** The child assumes that powerful authorities hand down a fixed set of rules which he or she must unquestioningly obey. To the Heinz dilemma, the child typically says that Heinz was wrong to steal the drug because "It's against the law," or "It's bad to steal," as if this were all there were to it. When asked to elaborate, the child usually responds in terms of the consequences involved, explaining that stealing is bad "because you'll get punished".

Although the vast majority of children at stage 1 oppose Heinz's theft, it is still possible for a child to support the action and still employ stage 1 reasoning. For example, a child might say, "Heinz can steal it because he asked first and it's not like he stole something big; he won't get punished" (see Rest, 1973). Even though the child agrees with Heinz's action, the reasoning is still stage 1; the concern is with what authorities permit and punish.

**Stage 2. Individualism and Exchange.** At this stage children recognize that there is not just one right view that is handed down by the authorities. Different individuals have different viewpoints. "Heinz," they might point out, "might think it's right to take the drug, the druggist would not." Since everything is *relative*, each person is free to pursue his or her *individual* interests. One boy said that Heinz might steal the drug if he wanted his wife to live, but that he doesn't have to if he wants to marry someone younger and better-looking. Another boy said Heinz might steal it because maybe they had children and he might need someone at home to look after them. But maybe he shouldn't steal it because they might put him in prison for more years than he could stand.

What is right for Heinz, then, is what meets his own self-interests.

You might have noticed that children at both stages 1 and 2 talk about punishment. However, they perceive it differently. At stage 1 punishment is tied up in the child's mind with wrongness; punishment "proves" that disobedience is wrong. At stage 2, in contrast, punishment is simply a risk that one naturally wants to avoid.

Although stage 2 respondents sometimes sound amoral, they do have some sense of right action. This is a notion of *fair exchange* or fair deals. The philosophy is one of returning favors--"If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." To the Heinz story, subjects often say that Heinz was right to steal the drug because the druggist was unwilling to make a fair deal; he was "trying to rip Heinz off," Or they might say that he should steal for his wife "because she might return the favor some day"

Respondents at stage 2 are still said to reason at the preconventional level because they speak as isolated individuals rather than as members of society. They see individuals exchanging favors, but there is still no identification with the values of the family or community.

## Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development



### Summary

According to Kohlberg, children early in their middle childhood will typically display "Preconventional" moral reasoning. Children displaying preconventional moral reasoning have internalized basic culturally prescribed rules governing right and wrong behavior. For instance, they will appreciate that it is considered immoral to steal from others; that you must earn or be given things and not simply take them. Children will tend to live in accordance with these rules but primarily for selfish reasons, as a way of avoiding punishment and obtaining praise for themselves. At this point in time, they will appreciate their ability to make different kinds of choices, and also the reality of consequences associated with those choices. They realize that morally good behaviors attract praise and positive regard from peers and adults, while morally bad choices bring about unpleasant consequences and negative regard. They act accordingly, in a hedonistic manner so as to maximize their personal pleasant consequences.

Adopted from:

- Crain, W. C. (1985). *Theories of Development*. Prentice-Hall.
- <https://www.gracepointwellness.org/1310-child-development-theory-adolescence-12-24/article/41174-kohlbergs-theory-of-moral-development>
- <https://www.gracepointwellness.org/1272-child-development-theory-middle-childhood-8-11/article/37692-kohlbergs-stages-of-moral-development>